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leather glossary

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Leather is not a generic product and leather terms are not widely understood or standardized. We have provided a brief glossary of the most important terms used within the leather industry to help you evaluate leather qualities.

Altered leather: Leather that has had the original surface of the skin removed (usually due to imperfections in the original surface) and a new grain embossed into the leather. This is also called corrected grain. Most top grain leathers have altered or corrected grain surfaces.

Aniline: A colorless oily liquid made from coal tar used in making dyes and resins in organic synthesis.

Aniline dye: Any dye produced synthetically from coal tar products.

Aniline dyed or aniline leather: Leather that has been dyed in a dye bath with some level of dye penetration.

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Bark tanned: Leather which has been vegetable tanned mainly by means of tannins contained in the bark of trees.

Base dyes: Common (usually lower grade) dye colors used in custom colored leathers which are quickly made. Hides are dyed in advance awaiting the spray application of custom colors.

Blues, in the: The state of hides which have been tanned once using chromium salts. These hides are light blue in color.

Bovine: An animal belonging to the cattle or ox family.

Breathability: An important characteristic of a full grain leather. Due to its intact grain and pore structure, full grain leather breathes. This means that the leather adjusts to temperature and wicks away moisture and body heat, making it very comfortable to sit on.

Brush coloring: The process of applying dyestuff to the leather by means of a brush. In this cosmetic process dyes are not saturated into the hide.

Buffed leather: Leather from which the grain is removed by an abrasive or bladed cylinder. This process is used in altered or corrected grain leather.

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Chrome tannage: Leather tanned with chromium salts resulting in soft, mellow hides receptive to excellent color variety.

Combination tannage: Leather which receives chrome and vegetable tannage producing suppleness and body in the hide.

Corrected grain: Commonly referred to as top grain. Lacking an intact full grain surface. Usually heavily pigmented.

Cowhide: Term specifically applied to leather made from hides of cows, although the term is sometimes loosely used to designate any leather tanned from hides of animals of the bovine species.

Crock: The transfer of color from the leather surface; more commonly found in naked leathers.

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Degained leather: Leather from which the grain has been removed after tanning, by splitting, abrading or other processes.

Drum dyeing: The application of dyestuffs to leather by the immersion of the leather in a drum that is tumbled. This process allows full dye penetration into the fiber.

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Embossed leather: Usually corrected grain, in which a pattern is applied by extreme pressure in a press to give a unique design or imitation of full grain characteristics. Sometimes leathers are embossed to make them appear to be another leather, such as embossing an alligator pattern into cowhide.

Enhanced full grain: Full grain leather which has received minor surface alteration to improve grain appearance.

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Fat wrinkle: Wrinkles in the grain of leather caused by fat deposits in the animal, that create beauty in the leather. Fat wrinkles are not visible in imitation grain leather.

Finish: Generally defines a surface application on the leather to color, protect or mask imperfections. More specifically, it refers to all processes administered to leather after it has been tanned.

Full grain: Leather in which the grain layer or dermis has not been altered. The grain layer gives each type of leather its distinctive appearance.

Full hand: This defines leather which is full bodied and robust. Also called round hand or full round hand.

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Grain (leather): The outside of the hide or skin consisting of the pores, cells, wrinkles and other characteristics which constitute the natural texture of the leather.

Grain character: The natural markings on the surface of the leather.

Grain, embossed: An artificial grain pressed into the surface of top grain leather from which the original grain has been removed.

Grain sueded: A buffing process to raise the fibers on the grain side of a hide or skin to produce a

velvet-like effect. This is also known as "nubuck" leather.

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Hand: A leather industry term used to describe the feel, i.e. suppleness or fullness of upholstery leather.

Heavy leather: A somewhat indefinite term, generally understood to include vegetable tanned sole, belting, strap and mechanical leathers manufactured from unsplit cattlehides.

Hide: The pelt of a large animal.

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Kip: The hide from a grass-fed, immature bovine.

Leather: An animal hide which has been preserved and dressed for use.

Leatherette: A manufactured product which imitates leather.

Liming: This process includes removal of the hair, preparing the hides for the tanning process.

Matte finish: A flat or dull finish.

Milling: A process which produces suppleness in hides.

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Naked leather: A dyed leather which has received no topical application that may mask or alter the natural state of the leather.

Natural grain: A leather which retains the full, original grain.

Nubuck: A brushed, grain-sueded leather.

Oak tannage: Originally the tannage of leather was almost entirely with oak bark, later the term applied to tannage with a blend containing oak tannin. Now, it is loosely applied to any tannage of heavy leather with vegetable extracts.

Overtannage: See Retannage.

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Papillary: The upper portion of the hide which has been separated from the reticular or split layer.

Patent leather: Leather with a glossy impermeable finish produced by successive coats of drying oils, varnish, or synthetic resins.

Patina: A natural characteristic that develops on full grain leather through normal use over a period of time.

Perforated: In leather, this is the process of die-cutting small holes to form a pattern. The holes can vary in size, density and pattern.

Pigmented: Leather that has been sprayed with a pigmented, opaque finish.

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Rawhide: Untanned or partially tanned cattlehides.

Reconstructed leather: Material composed of collagen fibers, obtained from macerated hide pieces, which have been reconstructed into a fibrous material.

Retannage: A modifying secondary tannage applied after intermediate operations following the primary tannage to further enrich and enhance the quality of the leather. All leathers are not retanned, however, Spinneybeck leathers are always retanned.

Round hand: A full-handed leather, usually slightly swelled through tannage and fat liquoring.

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Saturation: A most important aspect in producing high quality leathers. Full saturation of tanning, fat liquors and dyes are essential in the production of fine leathers.

Shrunken grain leather: A full, natural grain leather which is shrunken to enlarge and enhance the grain character of the leather.

Side: Half a hide cut along the back bone.

Side leather: Hides which have been cut in half, forming two "sides" in order to better accommodate small tannery equipment.

Shave: Hides are shaved to a particular thickness after tannage by a large shaving machine. The excess is removed from the bottom of the hide.

Skive: The shave, slice or divide to peel into a thin layer, or to reduce leather to a specific thickness.

Skiver: A thin, soft leather made of the grain side of a split sheep or goatskin.

Snuffed: The grain surface is abraded with brushes, emery wheel or sandpaper. Leather is snuffed for the purpose of removing defective grain or sueding the surface of the leather.

Split leather: Leather made from the bottom split, or reticular layer of the hide, which has an imitation grain embossed into a heavily finished pigmented surface to simulate papillary leather.

Splitting: Cutting leather into two or more layers preparatory to tanning.

Strap leather: Heavyweight, vegetable tanned leather used for industrial purposes or to support seats and backs on certain types of seating.

Suede: A fibrous leather, typically made from the reticular part of the hide.

Sueding: The process of raising fibers on the grain side of a hide or skin to give a velvet nap effect. This is generally called "nubuck" or "grain sueded."

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Table dyeing: The application of dyestuff to leather with a brush; the leather being laid on a table. Also called brush coloring.

Table run: Leathers which are not graded.

Tannin: Any various solvent, astringent substances of plant origin used in tanning leather.

Top grain: An over-used term commonly used to refer to corrected grain leather. See Corrected Grain.

Trim: The removal of the outer edges of the hide not suitable for making leather.

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Unfinished leather: Normally defines aniline dyed, naked leathers with no additional application intended to finish, color or treat in any way that would alter the natural characteristics of the leather.

Upholstery leather: A general term for leather processed for many uses, including furniture, automobiles, aircraft, architectural applications, etc.

Vegetable tanning: The conversion of raw hide into leather by use of vegetable tannins. This process produces leather with greater body and firmness than the more general method of chromium tanning.

Weight: The weight of leather is measured in ounces per square foot. Spinneybeck upholstery leathers range from 2.5 ounces per square foot to 3.5 ounces per square foot.

Wet blue leather: Leather which after chrome tanning has not been further processed and is sold in the wet condition.

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